

CCC Interview with Charles Blaha

Date: February 12, 2002

Location: Cedar Rapids, Iowa

Interviewer: Larry Bird

DNR: Where was your hometown?

Charles: Irving, Iowa.

DNR: How old were you when you joined the CCC's?

Charles: 17.

DNR: What did you do before you entered the CCC's?

Charles: I worked on a farm. I was still a student. A junior. This was '39. I was pulling 'Morning Glories' and weeds for 75 cents a day. I pulled Button weeds. Then I got a dollar day. I worked from sun up until sun down. You had to be a dependent of the family in order to get to the CCC camp.

DNR: Why did you enroll in the CCC program?

Charles: I had to support the family.

DNR: What camp did you go into?

Charles: Ames, Iowa. Number 1709. Sometimes we were detached to Des Moines. We worked in supply. They did the supply for all the CCC camps.

DNR: What dates were you at the camp?

Charles: October 22, 1939. I was discharged in February of 1942. I was on exempt service. That is why I was able to stay longer. When the war broke out, they took a lot of men out of the C's for the service. This company commander didn't want to discharge us. He put us on project assistance. The company was losing so many men, that if it dropped below 75, they would have to close the place out. They didn't want to close it.

DNR: What was your first day of camp like?

Charles: The lady in Ottumwa County, drove us up in her car. I got a physical, got assigned to the barracks. We got clothes and sheets and beds. They gave us a tour of the camp. It was a good deal. We only had to work eight hours.

DNR: What personal items did you bring with you?

Charles: My clothes and an empty pocketbook.

DNR: Were there any items you couldn't bring?

Charles: We weren't allowed a car. So my friend parked his car 8 miles from camp.

DNR: Who were your bunkmates?

Charles: We were spread out. We worked in bad conditions like rain and snow. One guy caught pneumonia while digging a ditch in the rain and went home and died.

DNR: Did you guys get along all the time?

Charles: Yes. It was a lot worse than the army. We had some guys from Elguero who were ornery. So if you didn't get along then you put on 16 ounce gloves and fight. I saw one fight last two hours with no rounds. Ames is 7th Corps (army) area. All of a sudden we got a couple of guys from Louisiana. Tony was with me in four inches of snow. They had never seen snow before. I threw a snowball at one of them and hit him in the side of the face. The leader came up to us as we were about to fight, and said we would have to wait until we got back to camp. So we got back to camp and I went to barracks number nine. I told my barracks chief I didn't want to fight him. The barracks chief said, 'You have to fight this guy. Your not going to disgrace barracks nine. Barracks nine has the toughest guys in this company.' And these guys from Louisiana, lived in barracks eight. We couldn't fight outside because of the weather. We had to fight inside in one of the barracks. Of course we had to move the bunk beds. Before that I went over to the quartermasters to get my gloves. There he was. I said, 'Hey, I've been in golden gloves.' I was bluffing of course. He said, 'I don't give a ----.' Now at one time a trainer once told me that I had a good left. He was a big guy. We were both sluggers. I kept my arm out against his nose and he couldn't reach me. Then I noticed after a while that his nose was bleeding. So I started going after that nose. And after a while they had to stop the fight. He was never able to get to me. And I didn't do anything to disgrace barracks nine.

DNR: Tell me about the food in the mess hall?

Charles: Good. The meals were good. I was able to gain weight and grow. For breakfast we had eggs, pancakes, and bacon with orange juice. It was a full good breakfast. For lunch, if we were out in forestry, cutting cattail, to insulate the trees, they would bring out meat sandwiches and coffee. Dinner was big. You could eat as much as you want. They supplied us with everything.

DNR: Who did your cooking?

Charles: We had our own cooks. Then we had KP. We would cut the gum from under the table. It was a 14 hour shift. You had to be a table waiter. You would have these big tables, and you would bring back bowls of food when they became empty.

DNR: How were the holiday meals?

Charles: We would have ham and yams with ice-cream. For Christmas I would go home. I lived a hundred miles away. I couldn't take the train because it was \$3. So we would catch the blinds on the train and ride. The railroad detectives would let us stay on. By the time we got there we were black as coal. When in uniform, we could hitchhike without any problem. One time we got dropped off at a gas station when it was 15 degrees below zero. We stayed warm in the station. But we couldn't stay because someone had robbed him overnight. We had to go and we saw a school house. So we pulled out weeds and made a bed out of it in the women's room. A milk truck came and picked us up. But we had to spend the night in that shithouse.

DNR: When was payday?

Charles: Every month. We got paid \$30 a month. \$22 went to my mom. \$8 was left for me.

DNR: How did you spend your money?

Charles: We all smoked. They were 10 cents a pack. But Camels were two for a quarter. We bought the Bull Durham. We went to the state fair. It cost fifty cents to get there. We slept overnight under the bleachers because we didn't want to pay another fifty cents. It was a miserable night. There was a lady who had her head off. I passed out and he took me over to the Red Cross. I passed out. Then we hitchhiked back.

DNR: What did you do on your weekends?

Charles: We would go home. We didn't want to stay there any longer than we had too.

DNR: How was the Sabbath observed on Sunday?

Charles: We went to church in Ames. They had a chaplain in the C's. He was okay. But we liked to go uptown. All my friends went together.

DNR: Were there sports activities?

Charles: No. We had golden gloves. I did it for the training but I wouldn't box.

DNR: What type of discipline was used for rule violations?

Charles: Extra duty.

DNR: Did they have vocational or educational opportunities?

Charles: I went to the 11th grade. At camp I did correspondence to finish high school. It took two years. I took typing.

DNR: Who were your teachers?

Charles: Mr. Durtz. He was the head of education. The classes were held at camp.

DNR: So you got a high school education?

Charles: Yes.

DNR: What was the main project at the camp?

Charles: I was a field leader. We worked forestry.